TRICK OR TREAT? COMPETING CONSTRUCTIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT HALLOWEEN

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Introduction

My own experience of consuming news discourse suggested that the theme of moral panic in relation to young people's potential anti-social behaviour is a regular feature around Halloween. It did not surprise me, then, that on conducting a Google news search with the word "Halloween" in October 2006 a large proportion of the stories returned were indeed on that topic. The fact that an "egg ban" had been planned for various regions of England and Wales gave me an interesting case study within which to compare and contrast how the young people and their behaviour were constructed. During the same search I accessed information about a poster produced by Wiltshire Police for local residents to place in their windows in an attempt to ward off potential anti-social activities. It struck me that it may be interesting to consider this poster alongside the press coverage of the egg ban in order to see the extent to which, in some degree of direct communication with young people and older residents, the police force were reproducing or challenging dominant discourses around young people's Halloween activities.

The paper takes a Foucauldian approach to discourse construction and reproduction. Foucault (2002) says that, on any one topic, there are always multiple discourses vying for dominance, or to be viewed as "truth", thus calling into question the status of "truth" and "facts". It is not that Foucault denies the existence of a material reality; he simply recognises that discourses can never be absolute reflections of reality as they are *practices* that continuously construct and reconstruct the objects of which they speak. He talks of a "will to truth", whereby discourses will reject anything that does not fit, or construct "deviant positions" for such objects. The fact that there are multiple discourses vying for dominance means that it is often possible for us to observe discursive struggle in texts. Although individual sets of spoken or written words do not for Foucault constitute discourse, by looking at these we can begin to analyse which discourses are at work and are engaged in struggle with each other over the positioning of different objects (in this particular case young people). At the same time, various sociolinguists who have taken a Foucauldian approach would suggest that what might traditionally be seen as "contradictions" should not in fact be viewed as

such: what is actually happening in such cases is that different discourses are being drawn upon simultaneously in the process of a speaker or writer engaging with a material situation or constructing an identity or whatever (cf. Fraser and Cameron 1989 and Coates 1999). In trying to apply Foucault's theoretical framework in a meaningful way to the close analysis of texts, thus bridging the gap between these different types of discourse analysis, it has also been useful to draw upon seminal work in pragmatics and sociolinguistics by authors such as Brown and Levinson (1987) and Goffman (1981).

Young people at Halloween: mischief or threat?

One of the main themes of press coverage of Halloween (especially in local papers) is the threat of anti-social behaviour from local young people. Around Halloween 2006 police in a number of regions of England and Wales imposed an "egg ban", that is, supermarkets were advised not to sell eggs to under-16-year-olds because of the potential for them to be thrown at windows as "tricks" in "trick or treat" activities. It is interesting to compare and contrast headlines relating to this, and the fact that these headlines tend to fall rather neatly into themes reinforces the notion that there are indeed specific discourses being drawn upon and reproduced here. The headlines are comparable in that, rather than focusing on the immediate "news" that an egg ban is planned, they focus for the most part on the potential anti-social activities of the young people as opposed to the ban itself. They contrast in that there are variations in the tone with which the topic is approached and the ways in which young people are constructed. Although the presence of a discourse of moral panic is very clear, and indeed is dominant, not all papers draw upon this discourse, indeed some could be seen to be critiquing it given the humorous tone they use and the word choices they make.

The *Manchester Evening News'* headline was "Trick or treat Halloween kids facing egg ban" and *Sudbury Today* had "Halloween warning to youngsters". The tone of these headlines is the most neutral of any of those we shall consider, and the use of "kids" and "youngsters" does not engage with any idea of young people as a threat. *The Times'* "No treat for Halloween troublemakers" constructs the young people more negatively, but still as naughty children as opposed to anti-social youths. One set of headlines draws upon traditional fairy story discourses and as such engages with the potential negativity of behaviour, but again in such a way that it is childlike and non-threatening. The *Newbury Weekly News'* headline is "No scare stories this Halloween", the *Wirral Globe's* is "Don't be mean this Halloween" and the *Oxford Mail's* is "Don't be horrid this Halloween".

The majority of headlines, however, construct the young people much more negatively, and construct a clear "us and them" pattern (cf. Van Dijk 1998)

between young people and police. *This is Swindon* has "Crackdown on the Halloween pranksters", the least harsh of this set of headlines, which actually occupies the middle ground between the last set and this one given its word choice of "pranksters". The *Yorkshire Post's* headline is "Halloween hooligans facing egg sales ban" and the *Wirral Globe* carries a second article the headline of which is "Police to target Halloween hooligans". The word choice of "hooligan" constructs the young people as older and more threatening, with echoes of course of football hooliganism, another great area of moral panic. What is particularly interesting here, though, is the *Wirral Globe's* headline which seems in such stark contrast to its other headline mentioned in the paragraph above ("Police to target Halloween hooligans" versus "Don't be mean this Halloween"). This is a nice illustration of the fact that competing discourses can appear together and that this is more complex than a simple "contradiction". The *Stamford Mercury* and *icWales* construct the young people more negatively again. Their headlines are "Crackdown on Halloween yobs" and "Police get tough on Halloween yobs" respectively. The appearance of the word "crackdown" in two of the headlines perhaps suggests it has become a cliché, or a "dead metaphor" to use Orwell's term, which reminds us that, although discourses are continuously reproduced, there is a large degree of stagnancy, particularly in those that are dominant.

The *Suffolk Evening Star* and *icCroydon* go yet further and construct the potential situation using military discourses. Their headlines are "Ban on Halloween Ammunition" and "Police plan Halloween blitz" respectively. These headlines reinforce the "us and them" pattern that has been mentioned above by constructing the situation as a battle with two clear "sides", and their discourses are similar, but if we look more closely their sympathies can be seen to lie in different places. The military action is attributed to a different party in each case, the young people in the case of the *Suffolk Evening Star* and the police in the case of *icCroydon*. Furthermore, "blitz" is an intertextual reference to a bombing campaign carried out by "the enemy" (in the context of English media) in the Second World War, so *icCroydon's* coverage could be seen to be critical of the police's heavy handedness.

Wiltshire Police Poster: an anomaly?

At the same time as the egg ban was being planned and put in place, Wiltshire Police Force produced a poster for residents to place in their windows in an attempt to communicate a message to young people about their potential Halloween activities. It is shown below.

(Reproduced with the permission of Wiltshire Police Force).

Moral Panic or neighbourliness?

In the light of the coverage of the egg ban and the discourses reproduced within it, it is illuminating to analyse this poster in a similar way to see the extent to which it "fits with" the discourse trends around this topic. The poster is interesting for several reasons: the multiple discourses it uses around young people's Halloween activities, the multiple audiences it addresses, and in relation to this the way in which one set of addressees are in turn positioned as addressers. This is not simply a message from the police to the community; it is more complex than that.

The poster was made available by Wiltshire Police to local residents so that is the first line of communication we shall consider. Although the "Happy

Halloween" at the top of the poster is the first piece of text the resident would read, presumably they would scroll through the poster in order to identify its function and would restart their reading at the bottom section which contains instructions for its use. The instructions read: "If you don't want to be disturbed by Halloween callers cut out the notice above and display it in a prominent position by your front door". Whilst clearly engaging with concerns about anti-social behaviour, the linguistic choices that are made here are neutral as regards connotations. It is easy to imagine "disturbed" being replaced by "frightened" and "callers" being replaced by "trick or treaters", "hooligans" etc, but rather than simply reproduce a discourse of moral panic, Wiltshire Police, or whoever produced the poster for them, have decided instead to intertwine this with a discourse of neighbourliness and politeness. The text that follows, outlining the aims of the campaign, reads: "A Wiltshire Police Community Safety Campaign to: protect the elderly and vulnerable; protect unsupervised children; reduce trick or treat vandalism". Words like "protect" and "vandalism" suggest that indeed there is something to be concerned about, but the aims seem to consciously include all parts of the community, albeit the order in which these are listed is telling. By beginning with "protect the elderly and vulnerable", those who may be unsettled by Halloween activities are placed front and centre. It is notable however that those carrying out the activities have not yet been mentioned. That is to say that the key focus is on what might be experienced, or even simply inferred by the elderly or vulnerable, as opposed to any real threat that might actually exist. The text continues "protect unsupervised children". This is rather ambiguous. On the one hand it might be seen to be engaging positively with younger members of the community. On the other hand however it could be seen to do just the opposite. By using the word "children", and placing that younger group in the camp of needing to be protected, it could be seen to "other" the youth of the community yet more.

Who's addressing whom?

Given these instructions, the roles of addresser and addressee (or producer and consumer of the discourse) of the key part of the poster prove complex. There is an instruction to cut off the bottom part (the instructions) from the top part (the message to "Halloween callers") which symbolically "cuts" the line of communication between the police and young people and substitutes for it a line of communication between local residents and young people. The residents, if they accept their positioning and place the posters in their windows, are then positioned as addressers. Goffman's (1981) work on "footing" is illuminating in this regard, and indeed in the more general sense that it provides us with a potential illustration

of how wider discourse(s) can be reproduced, not necessarily consciously, by individuals.

Goffman claims that, for any utterance, there exist three roles, and that a speaker or writer does not necessarily, or indeed not even usually, inhabit all three simultaneously. The roles are animator, author and principal. The animator of an utterance is the person who utters it, therefore speakers in any regular context are always animators of what they say. The author is the person who composed the words. There will be occasions on which the author of the words is quite clearly someone other than the person uttering them, for example if the speaker is directly quoting another person. The notion of author is further complicated by intertextuality and reproduction of discourses however. Although a speaker may not consciously be quoting another person, if they are drawing upon an existing discourse then arguably the words are not fully their own. Principal refers to whether the person speaking the utterance "stands by" what they say. Again there are obvious situations, for example where someone is being purposefully ironic or sarcastic, where they will not be the principal of their utterance.

The Wiltshire Police poster is interesting in this regard. Although it has ostensibly been created to aid community relations, residents have been positioned to be the animator and the principal of the police's words, and in this sense it is very ideologically loaded. Furthermore, if the residents are positioned through the police's discourse, and relations between the residents and young people are already tense, this arguably "others" the young people yet further and perhaps redoubles the tensions.

The notion of "principal" continues to be key when we consider what is actually said (to the young people by the police via the residents) by the key part of the poster. Across the top of the poster are written the words "Happy Halloween". Regardless of the fact that this is placed at the top of the poster, however, given the general layout it is entirely possible that "Happy Halloween" would not be the first message to be read. The wording below this, being as it is larger and in starkly contrasting white on black, may be what catches the attention first, meaning the smaller "Happy Halloween" would actually be the message the reader would be left with after having consumed the whole poster. The larger lettering reads: "Sorry, no trick or treat here please". Whatever order these two messages are read in, they seem to "jar" with each other, potentially affecting how the reader would judge the sincerity of the message. Perhaps the large smiling jack o' lantern has been included alongside the words "Sorry, no trick or treat here please" to serve as a bridge between that and the "Happy Halloween", but it is questionable whether this is effective or not. The politeness phenomena displayed here are striking given the identities of the addressers and addressees (or at least those who are positioned as such).

Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal work on politeness is useful here. Brown and Levinson claim that each individual has "face" which may be addressed or threatened in any given interaction. There are two types of face, negative and positive. Negative face is one's desire to have one's own space and not to be imposed upon. This, for Brown and Levinson, is more likely to be addressed where there is more social distance and less solidarity between the interlocutors, or where they wish to suggest that this is the case. Furthermore, if there is a difference in status between the interlocutors it will be more likely that the lower status interlocutor will address the negative face "wants" of the higher status interlocutor, and avoid "threatening" that person's negative face. Positive face is one's desire to be liked. This, for Brown and Levinson, is more likely to be addressed when there is less social distance and more solidarity between the interlocutors, or where they wish to suggest that this is the case.

In the case of this poster, there is very significant negative politeness being displayed with the words "sorry" and "please". This is surprising given that it is older members of the community communicating with younger members of the community (or, if we remember that the message has originated with the police, high status authority figures communicating with lower status young people). Perhaps this turning on its head of social roles has been done consciously in order to appeal to the young people, but arguably it goes so far that it seems insincere and as such may backfire. The problematic nature of the message is redoubled when it is viewed alongside the words "Happy Halloween" which display high levels of positive politeness, thus attempting to suggest a level of solidarity or camaraderie between the residents and the young people, when the very presence of the poster would suggest this is lacking. The fact that there is such blatant use of both types of politeness at once in this poster goes some way to explain why the messages seem to "jar" with one another for the reader.

Conclusion

The texts that have been highlighted in this paper suggest that Halloween, and in particular "trick or treat" activities, are a key point in the discursive struggle over the definition of youth, its relationship to childhood and adulthood and the position of young people in wider society. Newspaper coverage of a ban on egg sales to young people constructs them variously as innocent children, mischief makers and criminals. There are examples of both the way in which continuous reproduction of dominant discourses can lead to stagnancy, and, in contrast to this, how one source may draw upon multiple, competing discourses when constructing its objects. The Wiltshire Police poster provides us with a relational aspect to the position of young people in society given that it is used as a means of

communication between the police and the young people via the local residents. The fact that the poster exists at all would seem to "jar" with the neighbourly discourse that is proactively reproduced within it, and the use of high levels of both positive and negative politeness adds to this ambiguity. It is illuminating to consider both the media coverage and the poster in the light of Foucault's notion of discourse which allows us to view the position of young people in society, particularly at Halloween, as a site of considerable discursive struggle.

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